FOUNDATIONS FOR ADULT LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY

November 1991

Alberta
GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA

92-01555/

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

ALBERTA ADVANCED EDUCATION
ALBERTA CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND EMPLOYMENT
ALBERTA EDUCATION

ALBERTA AGRICULTURE
ALBERTA CONSUMER AND CORPORATE AFFAIRS
ALBERTA CULTURE AND MULTICULTURALISM
ALBERTA ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TRADE
ALBERTA FAMILY AND SOCIAL SERVICES
ALBERTA FEDERAL AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
ALBERTA LABOUR
ALBERTA MUNICIPAL AFFAIRS
ALBERTA OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY
ALBERTA SOLICITOR GENERAL

ALBERTA ALCOHOL AND DRUG ABUSE COMMISSION
NORTHERN ALBERTA DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

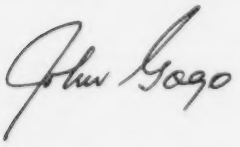
Foreword

I am honoured to present our government's policy on adult development.

Over a three year period 15 government departments and agencies collaborated to produce the "Foundations for Adult Learning and Development Policy." In the beginning we intended to produce a policy to address government's concern for adult Albertans who had problems reading and writing in everyday situations. On the advice of many contributors, it developed into a comprehensive framework policy on the development of individual potential among adults with limited basic skills.

This policy reflects the government's awareness of the complex nature of the issue and clearly states our commitment to those Albertans whose quality of life is adversely affected by deficiencies in basic skills.

On behalf of Premier Getty and the Government of Alberta, I am pleased to acknowledge the contributions of hundreds of students, educators, administrators, and private citizens who got involved in the policy development process. Their good counsel and informed recommendations contributed significantly to the "Foundations for Adult Learning and Development Policy".



John Gogo, Minister
Alberta Advanced Education
November 22, 1991

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Introduction

Since its formation in 1905, Alberta has made education a key priority. Through the years the province has consistently distinguished itself by implementing innovative and responsive educational policies, structures, and programs to meet the changing needs of its people.

Despite these efforts, the relentless progress of technology, the demands of global economic competition, and the inevitability of social change have made it difficult for more and more Albertans to achieve and maintain a quality lifestyle. This province understands that a key to meeting these challenges is found in the comprehensiveness of its educational policies. An important measure of a responsible educational system is the adequacy of policies concerning the provision of programs to meet the special needs of adults with low basic skills.

The purpose of the "Foundations for Adult Learning and Development Policy" is to set out a framework for reviewing, developing, providing, and coordinating programs and services offered by the Government of Alberta for adult learners with limited basic skills. With the growing awareness that learning is a lifelong responsibility of all members of society, the need to provide educational opportunities for those with poor or inadequate basic skills is central to the province's commitment to the fullest development of Alberta's human potential.

The "Foundations for Adult Learning and Development Policy" is a companion to such government policies as the "Language Education Policy for Alberta" and "Caring and Responsibility: A Statement of Social Policy for Alberta". It will guide future decision making by providing consistent direction for meeting the learning and development needs of individual adults with low basic skills, and for meeting social and economic demands for informed and participative citizens.

This policy is a commitment to provide learning opportunities for those whose learning needs are greatest.

Rationale

Albertans at Risk

In Alberta many adults are disadvantaged in their work and in their everyday lives by limitations in basic skills. Very few of these adults are totally unskilled or illiterate. Many are employed citizens who can read and write, but not well enough to cope with day to day demands.

Statistics Canada reported that the reading skills of 11% of Alberta's adult population are too limited to deal with the majority of written material encountered in everyday life. Another 17% have skills that only permit them to carry out simple reading tasks provided they are in familiar contexts and that the reading materials are clearly laid out.

The people of Alberta are an essential resource. Those with limited basic skills rarely achieve their full potential while often putting themselves, their families, and their employers at some risk.

- Children of parents with low basic skills are less likely to finish school or to see the value of education. The cycle of "intergenerational illiteracy" once established can rarely be broken through schooling alone.

- Adults with poor basic skills directly affect the lives of others:
  - They drive vehicles but cannot read road signs;
  - They operate production equipment but cannot read the safety manuals;
  - They handle dangerous chemicals but cannot read the warning labels;
  - They give medicine to their children but cannot read the dosage directions on the label.

Adults with poor basic skills may also be hampered by a lack of self-confidence. Often their circumstances are aggravated further by such conditions as poverty, ill health, physical and psychological distress, legal troubles and extended histories of social welfare dependency. Poor basic skills do not cause these conditions, but too frequently they exist together, and help to bring about a spiral of personal discouragement and decline.

The growing human, social and economic costs of these limitations are unacceptable in a modern society.

The provision of educational programs and services that establish a foundation of basic skills is the best hope many of these adults have for economic independence, personal stability, and a chance to become fully participating members of Alberta society.

Coordination

The Government of Alberta has been providing substantial funding to adult basic skills programs and services since the end of the Second World War. Per capita expenditures in this area have been among the highest in the country. This policy will help to ensure appropriate direction, fiscal accountability, and program effectiveness of the activities undertaken with this support. It provides a framework to review the current basic skills programs and services provided by government departments. Further, it addresses the coordination of programming initiatives by government, post-secondary institutions, community organizations, business and labour.

Foundations for Adult Learning and Development: A Conceptual Framework

The development of foundational learning and development skills is an educational process in which adults acquire the basic skills to achieve their personal goals, improve their social and personal lives, adapt to changing conditions, be economically independent, and assume greater responsibility for themselves, their families and their communities. This process involves the acquisition of basic skills in three areas.

Communication skills, at the minimum, include English language proficiency, literacy, numeracy, learning/thinking skills, and general civic, scientific and cultural knowledge, values and attitudes.

Living skills embrace knowledge of health, nutrition, family planning, management of the family economy, creation and maintenance of a home, the environment, and community participation.

Production skills encompass all forms of activity

directed towards making a living or producing goods and services, at whatever level of economic sophistication.*

(*Adapted from the UNESCO definition for adult basic education.)

Policy Statements

To meet the demand for informed and participating citizens, and for a well-trained and productive workforce, the Government of Alberta is committed to providing educational opportunities for Albertans to improve their basic skills. To help achieve this goal the government has developed the "Foundations for Adult Learning and Development Policy". This policy encourages and assists Albertans to assess their needs and to accept responsibility for taking advantage of programs and services to develop their basic skills.

Access to Programs Policy

The Government of Alberta will provide adult Albertans, who so desire, reasonable and equitable access to programs that establish a foundation of basic skills.

Assumptions

Competency in basic skills is essential for people to be productive in the workforce and to be responsible in family and community life.

The Government of Alberta recognizes the value of education and learning throughout life.

Support for the province's extensive system of post-secondary institutions, vocational colleges, schools and community-based organizations will be maintained.

Provision of Programs Policy

The Government of Alberta will provide appropriate programs to meet the basic skills needs of adult learners.

Assumptions

Programs for the development of basic skills must help individuals achieve their goals and help meet government priorities for the development of Alberta's human resources.

Learners have individual and changing needs.

Adult development programs should accommodate learners prepared to improve their basic skills by helping them to acquire the skills to function more effectively in their workplaces, in their communities, and in their everyday lives.

Programs must maximize the gains of learners with a minimum investment of learner time and public cost.

Government will maintain support for basic skills programs offered through the elementary/ secondary and post-secondary systems and for the extension of those programs through designated community-based organizations.

Student Support Services Policy

The Government of Alberta will facilitate the provision of student support services and will ensure that a reasonable level of financial support is provided to those otherwise unable to participate in adult development programs because of financial barriers.

Assumptions

Government policies should support the choices and decisions of individuals concerning their foundational learning and development.

Government policies must recognize and accommodate the fact that adult learners may have to overcome significant personal barriers before they can participate in education and training programs.

Lack of financial resources should not stand in the way of an adult's attempt to upgrade basic skills.

Government coordination of student support services is essential.

Cooperation and Partnership Policy

The Government of Alberta will encourage cooperation, collaboration, and the formation of partnerships between and among the public, private and voluntary sectors in the delivery of adult development programs.

Assumptions

Addressing the needs of adult learners with low basic skills requires a comprehensive approach and the commitment and participation of all sectors of society.

Business, industry, labour, and government are important partners in identifying needs in the workforce and in creating learning opportunities for under-skilled workers.

The mobilization of available resources and the development of linkages through cooperative action are important partnership strategies.

The identification of needs as well as the development, delivery, and evaluation of foundational programs for adult development are shared responsibilities involving government departments, post-secondary institutions, school authorities, community educational consortia, further education councils, proprietary training institutions, community-based agencies, professional associations, business, and labour.

Public Awareness Policy

The Government of Alberta will promote the Foundations for Adult Learning and Development concept and provide information about the availability of adult development programs and services.

Assumptions

Public information about issues and programs related to low levels of basic skills helps to address the problem by encouraging potential students and by stimulating public understanding, involvement, and support.

Adult learners desiring to improve their basic skills may require assistance identifying their own learning needs and should be provided with information about available programs and services relevant to their needs.

Principles

Based on the need for adults to acquire basic skills to communicate, to improve the quality of their lives, and to contribute to and to increase economic productivity, the Foundations for Adult Learning and Development Policy Statements were designed around the following three principles.

Individual Learner Context

The value and integrity of individual learners in the context of their cultural, social and economic environments must be understood and respected.

To understand the learning needs of individuals and the complications brought on by the limitations of their basic skills, it is essential to recognize and accommodate the context in which these circumstances are found. For example, financial insecurity, poor health, family obligations, inadequate language abilities, and physical and psychological abuse are conditions that confound attempts to enhance basic skills. Without an understanding of this principle, the efforts of decision makers, program developers, and instructors will be ineffective.

Changing Learning Needs

The learning and development needs of individuals will change throughout their lives.

Personal lifestyles must constantly adapt to many internal and external influences imposed by maturity or social and economic change. As these changes occur, individuals often see the need for new learning. Skills judged to be adequate at one stage in life, may be distressingly inadequate to cope with changed responsibilities at a later stage. A parent may be tormented by the guilt and self-blame of not being able to help a child learn to read. A high school dropout may discover the need to upgrade academic qualifications after experiencing the frustration of continued under-employment.

Shared Responsibility

The provision of learning opportunities and the acquisition of new skills required to meet the needs of adults is a shared responsibility of individuals, communities, government, business, and labour.

Learning is a voluntary and responsible action. Those individuals who are willing to make the commitment necessary to improve their basic skills and are prepared to act, require information, reasonable access to programs, professional counselling, and appropriate financial assistance. Clearly articulated education and training partnerships between and among individuals and the voluntary and private sectors and government are an essential characteristic of a learning and caring society.

A Discussion of Definition

The word "literacy" has come to represent all the foundational skills necessary to achieve the goal of being productive, responsible citizens. Consequently, it is impossible to establish an absolute and unqualified definition of literacy that satisfies the demands of all of these expectations. In Alberta we recognize that the basic skills necessary for adult learning and development must be distinguished into the categories of communication skills, living skills, and production skills. Literacy, the ability to read and write, is but one aspect of basic skills. Taken together these basic skills make up the foundations for adult learning and development.

Meaningful discussion and concerted action are made more difficult by the fact that the field of adult literacy is confounded by confused and contradictory definitions of terms. The result is that too often, without consideration of an individual's skills and circumstances, a person is labelled an "illiterate" when his/her level of schooling is below some arbitrary standard. Almost all universal measurements of "illiteracy" based on school completion or on tests of literacy competence serve only to over-simplify complex issues by ignoring differences in culture, social expectations, and economic demands.

The problem of "illiteracy" cannot be solved by deciding how many illiterates there are and forcing them all into classrooms until they can meet some minimum standard for reading and writing. Since very few Albertans are totally without reading and writing skills, it is a misnomer and disservice to label adults with low basic skills as "illiterates". The further distinction between "absolute illiterates" and "functional illiterates" does nothing to resolve the confusion about definition nor to redress personal insult. The cause of adult literacy would be well served if we were to drop the word "illiterate" as a characterization of individuals from our vocabularies altogether.

Foundations for Adult Learning and Development is a flexible, dynamic concept that can adapt to changing social values, economic demands, educational expectations, and the needs of the individual.

A Continuum of Skills

Skill development is a lifelong activity of all individuals. The idea that skills gradually develop from basic to increasingly greater levels of competency may be understood as a continuum or spectrum of skill development. Any ability may be described in terms of a continuum of incrementally more complex skills. In the case of literacy, the continuum of literacy skills might range from the total inability to read or write to the ability to process highly complex information. By establishing benchmark performance competencies along the skills continuum, it is possible to identify a person's current level of skills in relation to that individual's skill needs. The skills continuum concept makes arbitrary standards of literacy irrelevant and encourages understanding and consideration of an individual's skills in relation to that individual's needs.

Lifelong learning implies the constant reassessment of current skill levels against the demands of present or future ambitions. What is required is the willingness of individuals to act to eliminate the gap between current skill levels and the skills they need, and the provision of learning opportunities to make that possible.

Role of the Province

In addressing the foundational learning and development needs of adult Albertans with limited basic skills, the role of the Government of Alberta is:

- To promote a lifelong learning society in which Albertans are assured a high standard of education and training opportunities;
- To foster individual self-reliance and to provide positive learning opportunities for individuals that enable them to achieve their personal goals, to take responsibility for their actions, and to be contributing members of Alberta society;
- To support the continuing efforts of school authorities to ensure that all children and youth acquire basic skills in the conviction that prevention is the surest solution to the problem of adult illiteracy;
- To ensure that Albertans have access to quality learning opportunities, training, and educational programs and services;
- To assume leadership in initiatives to address issues concerning program coordination, development, monitoring, and evaluation;
- To consult with stakeholder groups including students, program providers, and community representatives concerning the development of public policy, and the systematic, effective, and responsive delivery of foundational programs for adult development;
- To encourage providers of adult development programs to consider the reduction and elimination of institutional and situational barriers to participation in their programs;

- To encourage collaboration among providers of adult development programs to create curriculum models that can accommodate the specific needs of individual learners, and to consider the use of appropriate technologies in the delivery of programs;

- To encourage providers of adult development programs to consider the specific needs of linguistic and cultural minorities, people of aboriginal descent, and handicapped and disabled Albertans in the design and delivery of programs;

- To encourage awareness of gender issues among providers of adult development programs and, in particular, the importance of female literacy as a significant strategy for improving the quality of family life and for breaking the cycle of intergenerational illiteracy;

- To coordinate the provision of student support and financing;

- To encourage educational providers to engage in collaborative actions and partnership arrangements with communities, labour unions, businesses, and government to bring together all available resources in addressing the problems of adults with limited basic skills;

- To encourage institutions, agencies, and communities to recruit, train and use community volunteers for appropriate roles in the provision of foundational adult learning and development programs;

- To encourage universities to engage in basic and applied research studies on problems of adult learning and development as they affect adults with low basic skills;

- To heighten public awareness of adult literacy issues and to provide information about programs and services for adults seeking to improve their basic skills; and

- To encourage the use of plain language in the writing of announcements, brochures and other public documents.

Conclusion

The "Foundations for Adult Learning and Development Policy" is a framework policy that aims to provide clear and consistent direction for meeting the learning and development needs of individuals with low basic skills and for meeting societal demands for informed and participating citizens. It establishes a context for developing new programs and services. It forms the basis for future planning and gives direction for taking action. It is an assurance that learning opportunities will be provided, especially for people with limited basic skills. Together with other social and educational policies of the government, it sets an appropriate context for the development and maintenance of specific program policies designed to meet the needs of adults for basic skills in an ever-changing cultural, economic and social environment.